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THE  
LITERARY HISTORY  
OF  
PARNELL'S 'HERMIT.'

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BY  
WILLIAM E. A. AXON, M.R.S.L., &c.

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ALTHOUGH Parnell's poem of the 'Hermit' can no longer be considered what Mitford declared it to be, "one of the most popular in our language," it still holds a certain and assured place in English literature. But, apart from its interest as a piece of English verse that has been a favourite with several generations, the 'Hermit' demands attention as one link in a curious chain of the history of fiction.

The readers of Voltaire are never likely to forget his romance of 'Zadig;' and one of the most striking passages in that remarkable work is the twentieth chapter, in which Zadig travels in company with an angel disguised as an hermit who steals a gold cup from a dispenser of ostentatious hospitality to give it to a miserly curmudgeon, burns down the house of a man who has received them with true liberality, and drowns the nephew of a widow lady by whom they had been most honourably entertained. These seemingly unjust and atrocious actions are all justified by the

wider view of the supernatural being who has read the book of fate and can foresee their real effect. The transfer of the cup is to reform the pride of the one and to excite the generosity of the other. Beneath the ruins of his wrecked mansion the good man finds a greater treasure to recompense his loss. The widow mourns the innocent youth of one who, if he had lived another year, would have been her murderer. Thus does the hermit vindicate the dark and mysterious ways of Providence to man.

Some of the critics, vain in the possession of a little learning, remarked that Voltaire's apologue was not original, but copied from Parnell. It is quite possible that such was the case; though Fréron might have remembered that Antoinette Bourignon, the mystic, had employed the same fable\*. Parnell, although he does not make any avowal of his indebtedness to any previous author, would hardly have cared or dared to claim credit for the invention of the story. He found the fable ready to his hand; he saw that it formed good material for poetry; and accordingly he made the best use of it that he could in the poem which, more than any thing else, has kept his memory from oblivion. Pope says that Parnell found the story in Howell's 'Letters,' a very curious book which was first printed in 1645. Pope pronounced Parnell's poem very good. "The story," he says, "was written originally in Spanish, whence probably Howell had translated it into prose and inserted it in one of his 'letters.'" Addison liked the scheme, and was not disinclined to come into it†. Of this supposed Spanish original we have no other testimony.

\* Mitford has pointed this out in his 'Life of Parnell,' p. 61, where he quotes from W. Harte these two lines:—

"Antonia, who the Hermit's story fram'd,  
A tale to prosemen known, by versemen famed."

She was born in 1616, and died in 1680.

† Goldsmith's 'Life of Parnell.'

James Howell found the story in Sir Percy Herbert's 'Certaine Conceptions or Considerations upon the Strange Change of People's Dispositions and Actions in these latter times,' a work "directed to his Sonne" and printed in the year 1652\*. Yet Howell's 'Letters' were printed two years earlier, as Beloe has pointed out†. But as this apologue is the sixth letter in the fourth volume, it may have been added in a later issue.

It is also used by Henry More, the Platonist, in his 'Divine Dialogues,' which were published in 1668. The "Eremite and the Angel" is in the second dialogue, chap. xxiv., and follows very closely that given in the 'Gesta Romanorum,' to which we shall presently refer. This coincidence was pointed out by Mr. S. Whyte at the close of the last century‡. More's version is as follows:—

"A certain Eremite having conceived great jealousies touching the due administration of Divine Providence in external occurrences in the world, in this anxiety of mind was resolved to leave his cell and travel abroad to see with his own eyes how things went abroad in the world. He had not gone half a day's journey, but a young man overtook him and joyn'd company with him and insinuated himself so far into the Eremite's affection, that he thought himself very happy in that he had got so agreeable a companion. Wherefore resolving to take their fortunes together, they always lodged in the same house. Some few days' travels had overpast before the Eremite took notice of any thing remarkable. But at last he observed that his fellow-traveller, with whom he had contracted so intimate a friendship, in an house where they were extra-

\* Lowndes, *Bib. Man.* (Bohn), p. 1049. Dunlop's 'History of Fiction,' 4th edit. (1876) p. 290.

† Beloe, 'Anecdotes of Literature,' vol. vi. (1812) p. 324. He gives the story in full from Herbert.

‡ 'Miscellanea Nova,' by S. and E. A. Whyte, (Dublin, 1800) p. 145.



ordinary well treated, stole away a gilt cup from the gentleman of the house and carried it away with him. The Eremite was very much astonished with what he saw done by so fair and agreeable a person as he conceived him to be ; but thought not yet fit to speak to him or seem to take notice of it. And therefore they travel fairly on together as aforesaid, till night forced them to seek lodging. But they light upon such an house as had a very unhospitable owner, who shut them out unto the outward court and exposed them all night to the injury of the open weather, which chanced then to be very rainy ; but the Eremite's fellow-traveller unexpectedly compensated his host's ill-entertainment with no meaner reward than the gilt cup he had carried away from the former place, thrusting it in at the window when they departed. This the Eremite thought was very pretty, and that it was not covetousness but humour that made him take it away from its first owner. The next night where they lodged they were treated again with a deal of kindness and civility : but the Eremite observed with horreur that his fellow-traveller for an ill requital strangled privately a young child of their so courteous host in the cradle. This perplexed the mind of the poor Eremite very much ; but in sadness and patience forbearing to speak, he travelled another day's journey with the young man, and at evening took up in a place where they were more made of than anywhere hitherto. And because the way they had to travel next morning was not so casie to find, the master of the house commanded one of the servants to go part of the way to direct them ; whom, while they were passing over a stone bridge, the Eremite's fellow-traveller caught suddenly betwixt the legs and pitched him headlong from off the bridge into the river and drowned him. Here the Eremite could have no longer patience, but flew bitterly upon his fellow-traveller

for those barbarous actions, and renounced all friendship with him, and would travel with him no longer nor keep him company. Whereupon the young man smiling at the honest zeal of the Eremite, and putting off his mortal disguise, appeared as he was, in the form and lustre of an angel of God, and told him he was sent to ease his mind of the great anxiety it was encumbered with touching the Divine Providence. 'In which,' said he, 'nothing can occur more perplexing and paradoxical than what you have been offended at since we two travelled together. But yet I will demonstrate to you,' said he, 'that all that I have done is very just and right. For, as for that first man from whom I took the gilded cup, it was a real compensation indeed of his hospitality; that cup being so forcible an occasion of the good man's distempering himself and of hazarding his health and life, which would be a great loss to his poor neighbours, he being of so good and charitable a nature. But I put it into the window of that harsh and inhospitable man that used us so ill, not as a booty to him, but as a plague and a scourge to him, and for an ease to his oppressed neighbours, that he may fall into intemperance, disease, and death itself. For I knew very well that there was that enchantment in this cup, that they that had it would be thus bewitched with it. As for that civil person whose child I strangled in the cradle, it was in great mercy to him and no real hurt to the child, who is now with God. But if that child had lived, whereas this gentleman had been piously, charitably, and devotedly given, his mind, I saw, would have unavoidably sunk into the love of the world, out of love to his child, he having had none before, and doting so hugely on it; and therefore I took away this momentary life from the body of the child, that the soul of the father might live for ever. And for this last act, which you so much abhor, it was the most

faithful piece of gratitude I could do to one that had used us so humanely and kindly as that gentleman did. For this man, who, by the appointment of his master, was so officious to us as to show us the way, intended this very night ensuing to let in a company of rogues into his master's house to rob him of all that he had, if not to murder him and his family.' And having said thus, he vanished. But the poor Eremite, transported with joy and amazement, lift up his hands and eyes to heaven and gave glory to God who had thus unexpectedly delivered him from any farther anxiety touching the ways of Providence, and thus returned with cheerfulness to his forsaken cell and spent the residue of his days there in piety and peace."

Indeed, in the seventeenth century it had become a commonplace with which theologians might "point a moral or adorn a tale." Thus Thomas White, a Puritan divine, writing in 1658, says:—

"There is a famous story of Providence in *Bradwardine* to this purpose:—A certain Hermit that was much tempted and was much unsatisfied concerning the providence of God, resolved to journey from place to place till he met with some that could satisfie him. An Angel in the shape of a man joyned himself with him as he was journeying, telling him that he was sent from God to satisfie him in his doubts of providence. The first night they lodged at the house of a very holy man, and spent their time in discourses of heaven and praises of God, and were entertained with a great deal of freedom and joy. In the morning when they departed the Angel took with him a great cup of gold. The next night they came to the house of another holy man who made them very welcome and exceedingly rejoiced in their society and discourse; the Angel notwithstanding, at his departure, kill'd an infant in the cradle, which was his only son, being many years

before childless, and therefore was a very fond father of this child. The third night they came to another house where they had like free entertainment as before. The master of the family had a steward whom he highly prized, and told them how happy he accounted himself in having such a faithful servant. Next morning he sent this his steward with them part of their way to direct them therein : as they were going over a bridge the Angel flung the steward into the river and drowned him. The last night they came to a very wicked man's house, where they had very untoward entertainment ; yet the angel next morning gave him the cup of gold. All this being done, the Angel asked the Hermit whether he understood those things. He answered his doubts of Providence were increased, not resolved ; for he could not understand why he should deal so hardly with those holy men who received them with so much love and joy, and yet give such a gift to that wicked man who used them so unworthily. The angel said, 'I will now expound these things unto you. The first house where we came the master of it was a holy man, yet drinking in that cup every morning, it being too large, it did somewhat unfit him for holy duties, though not so much that others or himself did perceive it ; so I took it away, since it is better for him to loose the cup of gold than his temperance. The master of the family where we lay the second night was a man given much to prayer and meditation, and spent much time in holy duties, and was very liberal to the poor, all the while he was childless ; but as soon as he had a son he grew so fond of it, spent so much time in playing with it that he exceedingly neglected his former holy exercise and gave but little to the poor, thinking he could never lay up enough for his childe ; therefore I have taken the infant to Heaven and left him to serve God better upon Earth. The steward whom I did drown had

plotted to kill his master the night following. And as for that wicked man to whom I gave the cup of gold, he was to have nothing in the other world, I gave him something in this which, notwithstanding, will prove a snare to him, for he will be more intemperate; and let him which is filthy be more filthy.' The truth of this story I affirm not; but the moral is very good; for it shows that God is an indulgent father to the saints when he most afflicts them, and that when he sets the wicked on high 'he sets them also in slippery places, and their prosperity is their ruine.'—Prov. i. 32\*\*.

The caution of the worthy divine is to be commended in declining to affirm the literal truth of this narrative.

White, it will be noticed, gives Bradwardine as the authority for this apologue. This may be conjectured to be the author who was styled the Doctor profundus and whose 'Causa Dei contra Pelagium' was a work of weight and fame in the fourteenth century†. He was an Archbishop of Canterbury, who was born in 1290 or earlier, and died in 1349, of the plague. We can thus trace the legend in England to the early part of the fourteenth century.

In Germany it was used by Luther and by Joh. Herolt‡, whose 'Sermones de Tempore' were printed at Nuremberg in 1496.

In the thirteenth century it is found in several forms. From M. Gaston Paris§ we learn that it is in the sermons of Jacques de Vitri, who died in 1240, and in the 'Scala

\* White's (Th.) 'Treatise of the Power of Godliness,' 1658, pp. 376-379.

† Hook's 'Lives of the Archbishops of Canterbury,' vol. iv. (1865) p. 80.

‡ Mitford's 'Life of Parnell,' prefixed to the Aldine edition of that poet.

§ "L'Ange et l'Ermite, étude sur une légende religieuse, par Gaston Paris, lue dans la séance publique annuelle de l'Académie des Inscriptions, 12 Nov. 1880," *Journal Officiel*, 16 Nov. 1880. The present paper was in progress before the appearance of the "étude" of M. Paris. All special indebtedness to his work has been carefully acknowledged.

Cœli' of Jean le Jeune, who wrote about the commencement of the fourteenth century. "This beautiful apologue," observes Mr. Thomas Wright, "is of frequent occurrence in old MSS., and differs considerably in different copies." He has printed a Latin version from the Harleian MSS. of the thirteenth or fourteenth century\*. The great collection of stories known as the 'Gesta Romanorum,' there is reason to suppose, was compiled in England about the close of the thirteenth century for the use of preachers. It has been a storehouse for the poets and dramatists also; but its original intention was to provide the ecclesiastics with something wherewith to enliven their dry theological discourses. The story of the Hermit and the Angel is the eightieth of this collection; and an abstract of it is given by Warton †.

The story is found in a French conte, published in 1823, by Méon, who found it added to some of the manuscripts of the 'Vie des Pères,' to which it did not originally belong. In this poem we have the incidents of a cup stolen from one host and given to another, of the servant drowned, of the infant strangled, and of an abbey burned down that the monks might once more be poor and pious. By a process of natural selection Voltaire has omitted one of the murders, and Parnell has left out the conflagration. From this it may be doubted whether the witty Frenchman was indebted to the English poet or to one of the earlier texts. This has also been commented upon by Dunlop ‡.

The story is also in some of the recensions of the 'Vitæ Patrum.' One of these, in the 'Bibliothèque Mazarine,'

\* 'Latin Stories,' edited by T. Wright, 1842, pp. 10 and 247.

† Warton, *Hist. of English Poetry*, edited by Hazlitt (1871), vol. i. p. 256.

‡ Dunlop, 'History of Fiction,' 4th edit. 1876, p. 289. Wright's 'Latin Stories,' 1842, p. 101.



which has been published by M. E. du Ménil, is regarded by M. Gaston Paris as the origin of the mediæval variants. In this manuscript of the fourteenth century the actors in the story are all hermits or ecclesiastics, but the incidents, with the exception of the fire, are the same.

Goldsmith, writing of Parnell's 'Hermit,' says that he had been told that the fable was an Arabian invention. In effect it is in the Koran, where Moses is said to have met a nameless prophet whom the commentators style Al-Khedr :—

“ And Moses said unto him, ‘ Shall I follow thee that thou mayest teach me part of that which thou hast been taught for a direction unto me ?’ He answered, ‘ Verily thou canst not bear with me : for how canst thou patiently suffer those things the knowledge whereof thou dost not comprehend ?’ Moses replied, ‘ Thou shalt find me patient if God please, neither will I be disobedient unto thee in any thing.’ He said, ‘ If thou follow me, therefore, ask me not concerning any thing until I shall declare the meaning thereof unto thee.’ So they both went on by the sea-shore, until they went up into a ship ; and he made a hole therein. And Moses said unto him, ‘ Hast thou made a hole therein that thou mightest drown those who are on board ? Now hast thou done a strange thing.’ He answered, ‘ Did I not tell thee thou couldest not bear with me ?’ Moses said, ‘ Rebuke me not, because I did forget, and impose not on me a difficulty in what I commanded.’ Wherefore they left the ship and proceeded until they met with a youth ; and he slew him. Moses said, ‘ Hast thou slain an innocent person without his having killed another ? Now hast thou committed an unjust action.’ He answered, ‘ Did I not tell thee that thou couldest not bear with me ?’ Moses said, ‘ If I ask thee concerning any thing hereafter,

suffer me not to accompany thee. Now hast thou received an excuse from me.' They went forwards, therefore, until they came to the inhabitants of a certain city : and they asked food of the inhabitants thereof ; but they refused to receive them. And they found therein a wall which was ready to fall down ; and he set it upright. Whereupon Moses said unto him, ' If thou wouldest, thou mightest have received a reward for it.' He answered, ' This shall be a separation between me and thee : but I will first declare unto thee the signification of that which thou couldest not bear with patience. The vessel belonged to certain poor men who did their business in the sea ; and I was minded to render it unserviceable because there was a king behind them who took every sound ship by force. As to the youth, his parents were true believers, and we feared lest he, being an unbeliever, should oblige them to suffer his perverseness and ingratitude : wherefore we desired that their Lord might give them a more righteous child in exchange for him, and one more affectionate towards them. And the wall belonged to two orphan youths in the city, and in it was a treasure hidden which belonged to them ; and their father was a righteous man : and thy Lord was pleased that they should attain their full age, and take forth their treasure, through the mercy of thy Lord. And I did not what thou hast seen of my own will, but by God's direction. This is the interpretation of that which thou couldest not bear with patience ' " \*.

This is the oldest literary form of Parnell's ' Hermit.' It may well be supposed that the Arabian Prophet borrowed the beautiful legend, as he did many other things, from a Jewish source. The Talmud may, in its present form, be

\* Koran, Sale's translation, chap. xviii. Dunlop's ' History of Fiction,' p. 292.



later than the Koran ; but it embodies the traditions of a race who have always clung to the sacred memories of their literature and their religion. The form in which we find it in this vast encyclopedia of Hebrew learning is very different from those already given :—

“ Rabbi Jochanan, the son of Levi, fasted and prayed to the Lord that he might be permitted to gaze on the angel Elijah, he who had ascended alive to heaven. God granted his prayer ; and in the semblance of a man Elijah appeared before him.

“ ‘ Let me journey with thee in thy travels through the world,’ prayed the Rabbi to Elijah ; ‘ Let me observe thy doings, and gain in wisdom and understanding.’

“ ‘ Nay,’ answered Elijah ; ‘ my actions thou couldst not understand ; my doings would trouble thee, being beyond thy comprehension.’

“ But still the Rabbi entreated. ‘ I will neither trouble nor question thee,’ he said ; ‘ only let me accompany thee on thy way.’

“ ‘ Come then,’ said Elijah ; ‘ but let thy tongue be mute. With thy first question, thy first expression of astonishment, we must part company.’

“ So the two journeyed through the world together. They approached the house of a poor man whose only treasure and means of support was a cow. As they came near, the man and his wife hastened to meet them, begged them to enter their cot and eat and drink of the best they could afford, and to pass the night under their roof. This they did, receiving every attention from their poor but hospitable host and hostess. In the morning Elijah rose up early and prayed to God, and when he had finished his prayer, behold the cow belonging to the poor people dropped dead.

“ Then the travellers continued on their journey.

“Much was Rabbi Jochanan perplexed. ‘Not only did we neglect to pay them for their hospitality and generous services, but his cow we have killed;’ and he said to Elijah, ‘Why didst thou kill the cow of this good man who ——’

“‘Peace!’ interrupted Elijah; ‘hear, see, and be silent! If I answer thy questions we must part.’ And they continued on their way together.

“Towards evening they arrived at a large and imposing mansion, the residence of a haughty and wealthy man. They were coldly received; a piece of bread and a glass of water were placed before them, but the master of the house did not welcome or speak to them, and they remained there during the night unnoticed. In the morning Elijah remarked that a wall of the house required repairing, and sending for a carpenter, he himself paid the money for the repair as a return, he said, for the hospitality they had received.

“Again was Rabbi Jochanan filled with wonder; but he said naught, and they proceeded on their journey.

“As the shades of night were falling, they entered a city which contained a large and imposing synagogue. As it was the time of the evening service, they entered and were much pleased with the rich adornments, the velvet cushions, and gilded curves of the interior. After the completion of the service, Elijah arose and called out aloud, ‘Who is here willing to feed and lodge two poor men this night?’ None answered, and no respect was shown to the travelling stranger. In the morning, however, Elijah reentered the synagogue, and, shaking its members by the hands, he said, ‘I hope that you may all become presidents.’

“Next evening the two entered another city, when the *Shamas* (sexton) of the synagogue came to meet them, and notifying the members of his congregation of

the coming of two strangers, the best hotel of the place was opened to them, and all vied in showing them attention and honour.

“In the morning, on parting with them, Elijah said, ‘May the Lord appoint over you but one president.’”

“Jochanan could resist his curiosity no longer. ‘Tell me,’ said he to Elijah, ‘tell me the meaning of all these actions which I have witnessed. To those who have treated us coldly thou hast uttered good wishes; to those who have been gracious to us thou hast made no suitable return. Even though we must part, I pray thee explain to me the meaning of thy acts.’”

“‘Listen,’ said Elijah, ‘and learn to trust in God, even though thou canst not understand His ways. We first entered the house of the poor man who treated us kindly. Know that it had been decreed that on that very day his wife should die. I prayed unto the Lord that the cow might prove a redemption for her; God granted my prayers, and the woman was preserved unto her husband. The rich man whom next we called up, treated us coldly, and I repaired his wall. I repaired it without a new foundation, without digging to the old one. Had he repaired it himself, he would have dug and thus discovered a treasure which lies there buried, but which is now for ever lost to him. To the members of the synagogue who were inhospitable, I said, ‘May you all be presidents,’ and where many rule there can be no peace; but to the others I said, ‘May you have but one president;’ with one leader no misunderstanding may arise. Now, if thou seest the wicked prospering, be not envious; if thou seest the righteous in poverty and trouble, be not provoked or doubtful of God’s justice. The Lord is righteous, His judgments all are true; His eyes note all mankind, and none can say, ‘What dost thou?’”

“ With these words Elijah disappeared, and Jochanan was left alone ”\*.

There is another story illustrating the same moral. “ Moses sees a warrior come to a fountain, by whose side he leaves a sack of gold, which was taken away by a shepherd. An old man, bending beneath a heavy burden, then came to the fountain, when the horseman returned and accused him of having purloined the sack of gold. In spite of his protestations of innocence the warrior drew his sword and slew the old man. Whilst Moses is filled with horror at the sight, the voice of God explains to him that the old man had murdered the father of the warrior, that the money really belonged to the shepherd, although he was unaware of it, and that the warrior lost because he had acquired it without right and used it only for evil purposes ” †.

This has also found its way into the ‘ *Gesta Romanorum* ’ and similar collections.

We have thus traced Parnell’s ‘ *Hermit* ’ as far back as is at present possible. Whether it was the invention of a Jewish poet or borrowed by a Hebrew moralist from some still earlier source it is impossible to say.

That the Prophet of Islam learned it from some of the Arabian Jews is very probable ; but the manner in which it entered Europe and the mode in which it became incorporated with the ecclesiastical literature of the middle ages are not known ; though M. Paris has conjectured that it may have come from Egypt, where adherents of the three faiths of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity existed side by side. In corroboration of this, the simplest form

\* ‘ *The Talmud*, ’ by H. Polano, (London, n. d.) p. 313. Baring-Gould’s ‘ *Legends of Old-Testament Characters*, ’ vol. ii. (1871) p. 113.

† Baring-Gould’s ‘ *Legends of Old-Testament Characters*, ’ vol. ii. (1871) p. 113.

of the European story has for its characters the hermits of the Thebaid.

The apologue commended itself not only to a crowd of churchmen and divines, but to a poet like Parnell, a fanatic like Antoinette Bourignon, and a doubter like Voltaire. Sometimes it assumes the form of a very practical homily upon everyday life, and at others is bounded by the narrow limits of the artificial virtues of ecclesiasticism; but in each case the motive is the same. All versions of the legend seek to vindicate the moral order of the universe by an explanation of the seeming contradiction of particular instances.

The problems of life are essentially the same in all ages. "I have been young," says the Psalmist, "and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging their bread." There are many, however, both in ancient and modern days, who have not been so fortunate, and who have looked out upon a world where the righteous, to all earthly appearance, were forsaken. They have seen the tyrant triumphant whilst none dared to comfort the slave. They have seen Vice seated on the throne and Virtue dying in the dungeon. They have seen sorrow and evil in a thousand forms.

The existence of evil is alike the moral and physical riddle of the universe. Notwithstanding all man's efforts the sphinx has not relaxed the rigidity of her features, which still proclaim her the keeper of the unsolved mystery. This beautiful Hebrew apologue is one of the many efforts to reconcile the conception of an all-good and all-wise ruler of the universe with the existence of Wrong clothed in purple and fine linen, and of Right that eats the bread of sorrow and drinks the water of affliction.

There is a subtler problem which the story leaves un-

touched. It deals only with the surface of things. Beautiful as it is, it embodies the judgment of a primitive people who see only the concrete aspects of life. With them the blessings of God take visible shape in worldly possessions, in flocks and herds, in gold and silver, in men-servants and maidservants. The real touchstone, however, is internal, and not external.

“ He that has light within his own clear breast  
 May sit i' the centre and enjoy bright day ;  
 But he that hides a dark soul and foul thoughts  
 Benighted walks under the mid-day sun ;  
 Himself is his own dungeon.

Into this sphere of thought the old fabulist enters not. He is content to give dramatic force to that which Pope has expressed in didactic form :—

“ All Nature is but art unknown to thee ;  
 All chance, direction which thou canst not see ;  
 All discord, harmony not understood ;  
 All partial evil, universal good ;  
 And spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,  
 One truth is clear, whatever is is right.







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